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BY
RT. REV. MSGR. FULTON J. SHEEN, D.D.

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Communism and Religion

By RT. REV. MSGR. FULTON J. SHEEN, D.D.

THE purpose of this article is to investigate the truth concerning the Communist attitude toward religion. Communism, in fidelity to its Popular Front tactics, is not speaking of its anti-religious tenets. The Secretary of the Communist Party in the United States, Earl Browder, in his book entitled *What is Communism?*, writes: "Communists take religious beliefs into account. We respect these beliefs, because we think that religious-minded people will participate in the social revolution. . . . We Communists are completely opposed, on principle, to State coercion in regard to religious beliefs." (P. 190-191.) [In the very next paragraph, Browder writes: "We stand without any reservations for education. That will root out beliefs in the supernatural."]

Article 124 of the new Soviet Constitution seems on the face of it not to be unfavorable to the practice of religion. It reads: "In order to insure to citizens freedom of conscience, the Church in the U. S. S. R. is separated from the State and the school from the Church. Freedom of worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda are recognized for all the citizens." Our American newspaper correspondents in Russia, who send to this country only articles which meet the approval of the Russian Board of Censorship, have made much of this particular article and have stressed the "new favorable attitude" of Communism toward religion. Curiously enough, however, they state only the clause about "freedom of religious worship."

There is only one way of deciding whether or not Communism is still opposed to religion, and that is by studying the facts. At the very beginning it should be stated that most political observers in America regard the New Constitution as nothing more than "window dressing" for the democratic nations of the world. Because Italy, Germany, and Japan have opposed Communism, Russia is attempting to win the sympathy of democratic countries such as England, France and America; for that reason she has written a seemingly democratic Constitution. How "democratic" it is in relation to religion can be determined from the following facts:

1. On the first of October, 1935, N. B. Krilenko, Commissar of Justice of the U. S. S. R., gave a conference which lasted two and one-half hours on the rights and duties of Soviet citizens in the light of the New Constitution. In the course of that speech, the Commissar stated, commenting on Article 124, that "separation means that the Church does not and cannot enjoy any kind of juridical rights. Consequently it cannot and must not enjoy or be entitled to rights and privileges of any kind." It is immediately evident that unless a Church is guaranteed juridical rights it is not free to carry on religious worship in the real sense of the term. "Separation" then means "negation" in the New Constitution, and as such, Article 124 is only a reproduction of the R. F. S. S. R. Criminal Code, Article 125 of the 1935 edition.

2. In explaining the statement that the school is separated from the Church, Krilenko emphatically declared that *no form of religious education* would be

tolerated in any school or institution of learning. This interpretation has already been applied in theory since 1928 as is evidenced by the Criminal Code No. 122.

3. As a proof of the "window dressing" character of the New Constitution, it is well to remember that Article 124 makes a distinction between "worship" and "propaganda." It guarantees "freedom of religious worship" and "freedom of anti-religious *propaganda*." In other words, a citizen has a right to worship God according to his conscience, if he can find a church or if he can find a minister, a priest or a rabbi. But these are extremely difficult to find. For example, before the revolution there were 70,000 Christian churches and chapels in Russia. The Communist Party has recently declared that at the end of the second Five-Year Plan, namely 1937, there will not be a single edifice in all Russia consecrated to religion. Furthermore, the atheistic paper of Russia entitled *Bezbojnik*, of May, 1935, speaking of the churches, states: "We have closed all the opium shops." In 1917 the Catholic Church in Russia had 810 priests, and of those 810 there remained only 63 in 1935. In January, 1936, Soviet newspapers declared the last Catholic priest in Odessa "was cast into prison."

Even though one could find churches, priests, ministers and rabbis, would a citizen under the Communistic régime be permitted to establish a religious school? No! Because that is "*propaganda*." Would citizens be permitted to distribute pamphlets on "religious subjects"? No! that would be "*propaganda*." Would they be permitted to broadcast "religious talks"? No! that is "*propaganda*." But would the Commu-

nists be permitted to do all in their power to attack religion? Yes! for that right is reserved to the Communists by Article 124. They have the right to *propagandize against religion*, but a citizen has only the right to worship if he can find a priest or church.

This distinction between "worship" and "propaganda" is a further evidence of the clever deceitfulness of the New Constitution. It enables Russia to tell the outside world she believes in freedom of religious worship, but permits her to practice inside her borders all manner of anti-religious propaganda. It is worth adding that Article 124 represents a retreat from religious liberty rather than an advance toward it. Article 4 of the 1929 Constitution guaranteed "freedom of religious propaganda." In April, 1929, that right was withdrawn and the present Constitution continues that same negative and atheistic spirit. By a decree of April 8, 1929, which is still in effect, Article 18 states: "The teaching of any kind of religious belief whatsoever is forbidden in State, public or private schools. The facts which follow indicate clearly how Communism negates in practice that which it grants in theory.

4. If Communism were really sincere about the right to worship, would it definitely link up its educational system with the Society of Militant Atheists? America believes in separation of Church and State and allows freedom of worship, but America does not interpret "freedom of worship" to mean "freedom to prevent worship," nor does it permit the State Boards of Education to identify themselves with atheistic groups. But this is precisely what Russia does.

The proof is supplied by a circular letter addressed by the Commissar of Education to the directors of the district boards of education of Russia. This letter complains that there has not been sufficiently anti-religious teaching in the schools of Russia. As the letter puts it: "The results of the special investigation, on the initiative of the People's Commissariat for Education, made last year, and the material recently gathered, completing the all-union conference of anti-religious pedagogues, show that in one of the most responsible departments of Communist education—the field of anti-religious education—the work of the schools during these recent times has considerably weakened. The most elementary forms of out of class anti-religious work are very often completely lacking. Anti-religious work with the parents of the pupils is not under control."

In consequence of this, the Board of Education issues the following orders:

(a) "To impose upon the instructors of districts, territories, wards and city departments of public education, apart from the school inspections, the necessity of paying *rigid attention to the establishment of anti-religious work.*"

(b) "To insert in local textbooks a certain minimum of *concrete anti-religious material.*"

(c) "To take measures in guaranteeing that schools issue methodical assistance in *anti-religious education for teachers* and bring into force expedient graphic descriptive help according to the dictates of the public Board of Education and a special committee of the *Association of Militant Atheists.*"

The letter ends with a carefully selected bibliography of anti-religious books, listing over one hundred volumes, tracts and pamphlets, the majority of which have been written during the last five or six years.

In order to assist in the anti-religious propaganda of Russia, a book was recently written by E. Perovsky entitled, *Anti-religious Education of the Elementary Schools*. This book of twelve chapters explains in strict didactic manner the various points to be assumed in anti-religious teaching. Teachers are invited in the first chapter to raise the degree of anti-religious education in the Soviet schools to the very highest point. Principles of physical culture are inserted here and there and maliciously and cunningly mixed with anecdotes so written as to lead to sacrilegious ridicule.

The following is a textual quotation taken from p. 143. It is an indication of the ridiculousness of Communism: "Children must know that religion hinders the industrialization of the country, stupefying the minds of men and women workers by a belief in an immaterial god, who is supposed to regulate the life of each individual. Religion makes them still less stoic athletes in the conquering of difficulties." Later on in the same chapter we read this statement: "Those who follow religious tradition and listen to the agitation of the Popes, for whom religious peace is nothing more than strong campaigns intended to deceive toilers and mobilize their forces for popish purposes; these numerous worshipping men and women workers not understanding this, up to this day are inclined to remain in idleness on religious feast days, particularly such great feasts as Christmas and Easter."

5. In addition to this official anti-religious propaganda, there is the poisoning of minds through newspaper articles. For example, a Communist news sheet entitled *Robotnik* prints a letter which it claims was written by the Father General of the Jesuits, Pius Przezdziecki, to General Franco, in which the Superior General of the Jesuits is presumed to have congratulated Franco on his victory in Toledo and glorified him as a model of protective heroism, because "he and his troops fought under the cover of men and women in a brutal fashion." Everyone knows of course that the General of the Jesuit Society is not Pius Przezdziecki, but the Most Reverend Vladimir Ledochowsky, S.J., and that the story is another lie!

As evidence of the intensity with which Communists carry on their anti-religious propaganda, it may be noted that the anti-religious press of the Soviet Republic is represented principally by two reviews, the *Bezbojnik* (Godless), which is a monthly review, satirical in character and illustrated with a number of caricatures. The other is a bimonthly periodical entitled *Antireligioznik*, which defines itself as a "scientific and methodical review," destined principally for the direction of the militant atheists. Both these reviews are organs of "the central committee of the Union of Militant Atheists." It is to this group that the schools of Russia must look for inspiration and guidance. And that is called "freedom."

6. The *Antireligioznik* of May-June, 1935, which is edited by Yaroslavsky, has the following article concerning "Stalin on the subject of religion." The very fact that it should have quoted an old article of Stalin

proves there has been no fundamental change in the attitude of Communism to religion. One of the passages reads: "His studies at the seminary permitted Comrade Stalin to penetrate profoundly the methods by which clerical organizations stupefy the masses, educating them in a spirit of submission to the Czar and in a spirit of docility to authority. . . . Comrade Stalin in his article entitled "Marxism and the Subject of Nationalism," which appeared in 1913, presented in a perfectly clear manner the question of the attitude of the Communist Party which demands the liberty of religious profession, but it cannot and will not refuse to struggle against religion and all religious organizations. Stalin said: 'Basing ourselves upon the interest of the proletariat, Communists *will wage a campaign against Catholicism, against Protestantism and against Orthodoxy in order to assure the triumph of the Socialist mentality.*'" Incidentally, it might be added that Stalin was never long in the Orthodox seminary, for he was expelled from it at the age of fourteen. It was not his "experience" in the seminary which taught him how the clergy "stupefy the masses." It was Marx whom he believed, and whose books he concealed under his mattress until he was discovered.

7. Although Article 124 does permit freedom of religious worship, it nevertheless, as we have pointed out before, permits the Communists to carry on propaganda against those who have religious convictions. But abstracting from this militant atheistic characteristic of Communism, the right to worship is practically nullified by a severe prohibition of teaching religion to anyone under eighteen years; by the impossibility of

assisting at religious feasts because of the suppression of Sundays; by the establishment of a week of six days, and by the close scrutiny of workers which prevents them from being absent from their work on feast days of the Church. Added to all this is the economic impossibility of supporting in any way the churches, which receive no help from the State. The people could hardly be expected to support the Church because of their low wages.

8. In order to give an indication of the attitude toward the clergy, it might suffice us to cite an article in the journal *Troud* (Labor) of the 9th of August, 1935, No. 182. The author of this article denounces violently the "unheard of conduct" observed in a hospital of Moscow. Some one had dared admit and had taken care of a priest. Later on he was hidden from the other sick under the pretext of isolating him in order that they would not be "irritated by his presence." The journal goes on to say that the particular doctor who had dared "take care of a pope" was called on to explain his attitude to the Soviet authorities. And this is called "freedom of worship."

9. In December of 1930 there took place the first "Pan-Unionist conference of Institutions of Scientific Investigation on the subject of anti-religious work." The second conference of this Union took place in June, 1934. Twenty-eight scientific institutions took part, among which might be cited the Anti-religious Section of the Institute of Philosophy of the Communist Academy, the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of History and Culture, all the chairs and professors of history and philosophy existing in the different superior

schools, the Superior Institute of Philosophy, the Institute of Social Hygiene and the Director of anti-religious museums. (*Antireligioznik*, No. 4, July-August, 1934.) After having heard more than twenty papers the conference then indicated the lines of atheistic propaganda:

(a) To show the peasants that agriculture could not have made any advance except at the expense of religious ideals and religious psychology.

(b) To root out all religious sects, and

(c) To intensify anti-religious work in the schools.

And now, the World Convention of the Godless held an international conference at Moscow on February 7, 1937, for the purpose of coordinating attacks on Christianity and intensifying their persecution. Imagine a world-congress of *militant* atheists meeting under the sponsorship of a government which "guarantees freedom of religious worship"! The attitude of the Russian Government towards religion is the attitude of a bully to a timid youngster. The youngster is free to pick up a ball and examine it, for the bully tells him he is: "Just pick up that ball." . . . But the bully then proceeds to quote the rest of Article 124, "and I will knock your block off." So, too, Russia says: "You are free to worship, but just try it." If free, why *militant* atheism? America says her citizens are free to drive automobiles, but does she *propagandize* against them, or form a "Militant Society of Mule Drivers" to persecute the Auto Drivers? If freedom means anything, it means freedom from anti-freedom propaganda, and freedom from militant slavery.

10. *Antireligioznik*, No. 2, March-April, 1935, gives

an example of how the systematic atheistic plan is to be carried on. It cites a proposed model for the organization of anti-Easter campaigns in the schools on the occasion of Easter, 1935:

(a) "Verify the state of anti-religious work in the schools, discover the children contaminated with religion or other tendencies of the hostile classes.

(b) "Bring the parents of the children to school in order to have them take part in the preparation of the anti-paschal celebration.

(c) "Organize a circle of young atheists for the same program.

(d) "Edit a literary anti-religious journal, organize a series of anti-religious radio broadcasts for children.

(e) "The eve of Easter go either to the theatre or to the cinema, and Easter Sunday repeat the performance, or else visit the anti-religious museum and bring there the parents of the children.

(f) "On Holy Thursday go collectively to the theatre or the concert; the night of Easter organize an anti-paschal celebration." This would be like our government telling Americans they were free to celebrate the Fourth of July, and then sending for the English Army and Navy to demonstrate and propagandize against the victory of the Revolutionary War.

11. On the 9th of June, 1935, Yaroslavsky addressed the Union of Atheists. A résumé of his address appears in *Antireligioznik*, July-August, 1936: "If we measure the work accomplished by us by the standard of historical perspective, we can say certainly that in this domain we have won a victory of world

importance. It is not in vain that our 'friend' the Pope of Rome is so alarmed at our success. . . . We must utilize on a much broader scale our work of international education, and I wish to express some ideas on the tactics of the United Front. There already exists certain anti-religious proletarian organizations which have established a common bond of unity with other anti-religious organizations devoted to combat Fascism. In defending this tactic of the United Front, we, however, *can make no concession whatever of principles*. Our proletarian line of atheism must be maintained, but the tactics of the common front have an importance, because thanks to the tactics we are able to bring over new partisans to our point of view." This is a perfectly clear statement of the deceit behind Article 124 and the Communists' attitude toward religion where the United Front prevails. Their tactics are to say nothing against religion (Article 124) but in practice they are to do everything against it.

12. The *Antireligioznik*, No. 7, July-August, 1935, commenting upon the Pan-Unionists' conference, writes: "We have millions of workers who have broken all bonds of religion, but because they have broken with religion, *must the anti-religious work continue amongst them? Yes, we must be sure that these people are not only without God but that they are also militant atheists.*" That same number contains an article concerning the expansion of atheistic activity outside of Soviet Russia. "Our international work in the interior of the U. S. S. R. is very intimately linked up with our international work on the outside. Our *anti-religious experience is a lesson for the atheist*

proletariat of the world. In order to intensify our international organizations, we have organized revolutionary duplicates."

In Belgium, Moscow has organized a group of atheists who now publish a journal entitled *Sans Dieu* (*Antireligioznik*, No. 1, 1935). This Communist international publication sponsors atheistic papers in other languages throughout the world. Germany, for example, publishes *Neuland*; Austria, *Eret Au Combat*; Bulgaria publishes *Bezbojnik Sofia*; China publishes *Official Press*; Spain, *Sin Dios*; France, *L'Athée Militant*; Mexico, *La Sotana*; Holland, *Proletaristhe-bri jeenker in Nedderland*; Chili and Peru, *Vanguardia et la Sierra*; Poland publishes *Bezboznik Wojujacy*; Switzerland publishes *Proletaristher Freidenker*, and Czecho-Slovakia publishes *Majak*.

If international Communism were really sincere in its preachment about "freedom of religious worship" would it campaign so militantly against it? Another article in the Soviet Constitution guarantees "freedom to work." To be consistent why does it not propagandize against work? Why does it not preach unemployment? There is only one answer, and that is: Russia has only modified her *statement* about religion, but not her *attitude*, which is a polite way of saying that it lies.

The superficial semi-tolerance which has been mistaken as a sign of the evolution of the Soviet's religious policy is *due to other factors than the recognition of religion itself*. These factors are the following:

(a) Active persecution and massacre of the clergy in Russia have ceased. But this is not because Com-

munism no longer believes in murdering the clergy; it is because practically all the clergy have been "liquidated," which is the polite work the Communists use for "massacred." According to official Communist statistics alone, 30 bishops and 1,414 priests were executed in 1918-1919. The Archbishop of Perm was buried alive after having his eyes put out and his face slashed. The Archbishop of Tobolsk was drowned after enduring two months of penal servitude. The Bishop of Belgarod was subjected to horrible mockery and then plunged into quicklime. In July, 1927, 117 orthodox prelates were thrown into prison or were taken to concentration camps or exiled to Siberia. Because Soviet Russia is not carrying on massacres on such a large scale today is not because she has become religious, it is because there are so few left to shoot.

(b) The Communists had great difficulty imposing collective farming on the peasants who revolted against the idea. The Communist authorities then decided it would be better to separate the collectivization of farms from the anti-religious work. This temporary separation has been interpreted in some countries as a recognition of religion. As a matter of fact, it was only a question of tactics to dispossess the farmers. Now that they are dispossessed, anti-religious activity is continuing in their schools and on their collective farms. The proof of this is that Yaroslavsky, in his address of June 9, 1935, stated that "the militant atheists of Russia had great success with the Communist farmers."

(c) A third reason for the false impression is that in order to propagandize its Marxian principles

of Communism the officials of the Communist International have soft-pedaled the attacks upon religion. The Popular Front and United Front Communistic governments of the world today hardly ever speak of religion until they are sufficiently strong to overthrow the government. Such is the case in Spain, where they thought themselves sufficiently strong and immediately began the persecution of religion.

It is indeed curious that the governments of the world cannot see through the Communistic tactics, and that their silence during the régime of the Popular Front is only to serve better the annihilation of religion. These tactics were dictated by Lenin himself. As he put it: "The propagation of atheism by Communism must be subordinated to a more basic task—the development of the class struggle of the exploited masses as against the exploiters. . . ." The party of the proletariat demands that the government shall declare religion a private matter, but it does not for a moment regard the question of the fight against the opium of the people—the fight against religious superstition—as a private matter (*Proletarii*, No. 45, May 13, 1909).

(d) The fourth and final reason concerns an internal problem in Russia. The Communists have found that once they had crushed the Church the country immediately became full of all manner of superstition which it regarded as far more dangerous than the Church itself. The *Antireligioznik*, No. 1, January-February, 1935, speaks of an investigation which it made in the country. It discovered that many believed in the spirit of the house (*Domovoi*), or the

spirit of the forests (*Leichy*) or the spirit of the waters (*Bodianoi*).

As an example of how much superstition has taken the place of religion, an article in *Pravda* of June 21, 1935, speaks of some of the citizens resorting to bloody sacrifices and adds that as a general rule they are opposed to collectivization. In the Ural region a holocaust of chickens was offered to a pagan deity; in another case, an ox. This fact is very interesting, for it proves that just as soon as Christianity was crushed, there arose a host of vague mythologies. It is also indicative of the fact that man is incurably religious and that these poor people whom Communism hoped to win over to materialism are so dissatisfied with it that they use their minds to seek some more profound source for the mysteries of life. Even the Commissar of Education, Lunar Charsky, had to admit this: "Religion is like a nail; if you hit it on the head it only penetrates deeper into the wood."

In conclusion, Communism has two faces. One face is for Russia, where it is established; the other face is for the rest of the world, where it seeks to establish itself. The Russian face shows a double persecution against religion—physical and mental.

The other face is the one it presents to countries which it hopes to Sovietize. This face is kindly and even religious, for it knows that in order to win adherents in the beginning it must not antagonize. This brings us to these all-important facts:

(1) Communism in America is trying now and will continue to try to convince us that Communism is not anti-religious. It will even tell us that it defends re-

ligion against persecution. *This is a lie.* They are no more interested in preserving religion than Catholics are in preserving Communistic slavery in Russia. The tactics of the Seventh Congress in 1935 dictated the forming of "fronts" with Catholics, Protestants and Jews who believed in religion. And why? Because they knew that to attack religion at the beginning would compromise the infiltration of other Communist ideas. They are presently resolved not to attack religion but rather to flatter it during the "United Front" and the "Popular Front," but once they are strong enough to overthrow the existing society, then they begin their persecution. As Dimitrov told the delegates at the Seventh Congress, "The work of explaining the principles and the program of Communism must be carried on patiently, in a comradely fashion, and must be adapted to the degree of development of the individual Socialist Democratic workers" (*The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 122). Note that the tolerant spirit is one of expediency and not of principle. Dimitrov himself confirms this observation, for on page 161 he describes the Congress as a "new tactical orientation for the Communist International."

(2) When the Communists extend a friendly hand, look at it first and see if it is red with the blood of Russia, Mexico and Spain. Beware of grasping it in friendship, for the Communists well understand the tactics of Judas. Their new tactics do not mean a new philosophy, any more than the friendliness of a card-shark means honesty. The Communists admit this themselves in their own councils. "Tactics, generally, may change, but the general line of the Communist

International, viz., revolution . . . remains unchanged" (D. Z. Manuilsky, *The Work of the Seventh Congress*, p. 65). And if anyone doubts that Communism has ceased to be anti-religious, let him read the May 1st issue of the 1936 *Izvestia*, wherein Yaroslavsky says: "The struggle against religion is in no way put aside as some opportunists would believe."

Four years ago Spain was like France is today: France will be Spain tomorrow unless it unmasks the "United Front" of Communism. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that in five years the Cathedral of Notre Dame will be as wounded and wrecked as the churches of Spain. *If its destruction does not come to pass, it will not be because Communism has suddenly become rational and therefore religious, but because France will have "found it out."*

There are three stages in the development of Communism in democratic countries. The first stage is the broad "Front" which they hope to establish in America by capitalizing all grievances and by grouping all those who are not anti-Communist, which to a Communist means "Fascist." The second stage is the "Front" made up of a union of Socialists and Communists, as in France. The third stage is found in Spain, where they incite a Civil War to prepare for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. America is presently in the first stage! There is still time for it to be saved! But let us beware: Sow Moscow and you reap Spain!

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